

Creature Comfort

Keep Your Pets Safe in Cold Weather

Baby, it's cold outside! We humans can layer on sweaters, coats, and mittens. But what about our furry friends?

Take these six tips for keeping your pets warm and safe all winter long:

● **Send them to the doghouse:** If it's not cold enough to prevent your pets from being outside, still be sure to keep them protected. Offer outdoor cats a cozy box and dogs a dry, draft-free doghouse that's large enough to allow them to sit and lie comfortably but small enough to hold in the animal's body heat. Raise the floor several inches off the ground and cover it with cedar shavings, hay, or straw for insulation. "Turn the house away from the wind and cover the doorway with waterproof burlap or heavy plastic," says Betsy McFarland, senior director of companion animals and a companion animal expert for the Humane Society of the United States. Don't forget to leave outdoor pets plenty of water (in a plastic, not metal, bowl) and check to make sure it doesn't freeze.

● **Give 'em shelter:** "If it's too cold for you to be outside, it's too cold for your pet to stay out as well," says Susan Nelson, DVM, a veterinarian and assistant professor at Kansas State University Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospital. Freezing weather and wind chills can threaten your pet's life.

"Very young, old, and arthritic pets are especially vulnerable to the elements and prone to frostbite and hypothermia," Nelson says. So have a heart and bring them inside.

● **Protect them from poisons:** "Just 1 tablespoon of antifreeze can kill a dog; a teaspoon will kill a cat," warns Ohio veterinarian Carol Osborne, DVM, who specializes in holistic medicine. "Keep pets away when you change or drain your antifreeze and clean up spills immediately. (She suggests using a brand such as SIERRA, made from propylene glycol, which is less appealing to pets).

● **Prevent the agony of da feet.** Ice-melting products and rock salt can irritate and burn sensitive paws. After your pet has been outdoors, remove all ice and snow, rinse paws with warm water, and towel them off. "Consider booties. I prefer those with nonskid bottoms and breathable fabric on top," says veterinarian Kristen Nelson, DVM, author of *Coated With Fur: A Vet's Life*, which discusses the triumphs and trials of opening an animal hospital in Minnesota (brrr!).

● **Knock and honk if you love cats:** Even if you keep your pets inside (good for you!), give the hood of your car a sharp knock before getting in and honk the horn before starting the engine. "Neighborhood cats sometimes climb up under the hood of a car to get warm. The noise will wake them up and give them time to escape," says Betsy Saul, cofounder of Petfinder.com, a database of homeless, adoptable pets. And speaking of cars, never leave your pet in one. "Cars are like refrigerators in cold weather and may cause hypothermia," Saul notes.

● **Don't let curiosity kill the cat:** "Potpourri, scented oils, and candles are all hazardous for your kitty as well as electrical cords, Christmas lights, and tinsel," says Susan Nelson. ❧



— Maryann Hammers